

*Trinity 13 2010*

Children have a knack of getting to the heart of the matter.

'where do you live?'

'in the Rectory'

'is that a big house?'

'yes it is quite a big house'

How many of you live there?

Sometimes two, sometimes four of us.

Do you have poor people to stay?

No, not usually.

But some people don't have a house and you have a big one and you're a vicar so it isn't fair is it?

No I suppose not.

I was beginning to feel rather like the Vicar in the episode of *Outnumbered*, filmed at this church.

He, cornered by the children's questions on when Jesus might zapp someone finally lost his patience and said that yes, if being attacked by a polar bear, Jesus would zapp the bear.

The child horrified, berated him for suggesting that Jesus would kill an endangered species.

Reading the gospel passage today, I realised that a great many people coming into contact with Jesus must have felt wrong footed by him in the same way as one can feel wrong footed by a child.

Can you imagine having a dinner party, you have gone to a lot of trouble to ensure that the food is good, that your guests will be seated next to someone they will find interesting, and then one of your guests turns to you and says that you shouldn't invite your friends or family, but the poor, the crippled, the lame? How rude!

It is very hard when someone tells you that you should be doing something and you think they are wrong. If they are rude enough to tell you, you may feel little compunction about being quite abrupt in return. But when deep down you know they have a point, it is much harder to deal with.

It isn't really surprising that the Pharisees found Jesus difficult. The leader of the Pharisees would have been used to operating in a certain way, within the social and political customs of his day. There were norms of behaviour and he would lose his authority if he abandoned those.

What was true then is still true today.

Then as now, there were people with a social conscience. People who gave to the poor – otherwise there would have been no point in the beggars hanging around. And today there are people who help. There are soup kitchens, and hostels run largely by volunteers. And they do good work, much needed work. But there is a world of difference between magnanimously giving one's money or one's time to help from a position of relative wealth and security, and actually accepting the poor and the outcasts as one's friends – inviting them alongside other friends and acquaintances – risking what might be said, risking the outrage of one's long-standing friends who might misinterpret the gesture as a snub to them, or at the very least as a lapse in good taste.

We are talking solidarity with the outcast. Not paternalism or sympathy or benevolence, but solidarity. Total acceptance.

Perhaps the problem today is that our outcasts have become invisible.

As with the blind and the lame and the poor in Jesus time, the problem often starts young.

Let me tell you about a boy. We'll call him Steven – it's not his real name. His parents split up and he went to live with his father, but his father wasn't really cut out for responsibility. So he got taken into care for a few months, then went to live with his mother. Then back into care. Then back to his mother. His behaviour became difficult. He ran away from school, not once, but often.

When his mother moved no school would take him. They are legally obliged to, but they delayed it and delayed it on the basis that first he had to catch up with his school work – hard to do if you're not at school.

Left at home he would get bored, go out and mix with the only other teenagers around – those that had been excluded from school or older teenagers who were unemployed. He got into trouble – stealing cars and joyriding.

Fourteen years old and already written off. Already an outcast from mainstream society and who will befriend him?

Perhaps he will end up like the 17 yr old caught stealing for the second time and sent to a young offenders institution. Lack of staff meant he was locked up far more than he should have been, there was no exercise, nothing to do. A week later he became a statistic – one of the many young people to kill themselves in whilst being in a young offenders institution.

And which of us would care to show solidarity with these young people, sharing their hurt, their sense of failure and despair, bringing them hope for a better future, a future in which love features.

I am sure that Jesus would have reached out in love. He would not have been embarrassed to have counted them as his friends, to be seen eating with them.

It is all too easy to read the gospels and interpret what Jesus says to fit in with our own pre-conceived ideas. But what he asks of us is incredibly challenging. Individually we have to work out our own response to this challenge. But as a church it means we must welcome all who come and, more than that, go out of our way to invite others to share in our community – all others, the mentally ill, those who live alternative lifestyles, those who have been in trouble with the law, those who have a drug or alcohol problem, those who have no concept of the proper way to behave in a church. Welcome not as a means to an end, a way of increasing the church membership, but simply out of love because this is what Christ asked us to do.

If we do the work of Christ we can be sure he will be with us and his redeeming love will transform the lives of the sick and the despairing, the rejected will be restored, love's work will be done. Amen.